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Viewing cable 08SANSALVADOR1187, ARENA TABS ZABLAH AS VP TO VIE FOR CENTER VOTE

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#08SANSALVADOR1187.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
08SANSALVADOR1187	2008-10-15 22:21	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy San Salvador

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.wikileaks.elfaro.net/es/201106/notas/4565/>

VZCZCXYZ0000
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHSN #1187 2892221
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 152221Z OCT 08
FM AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0189
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 001187

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/23/2018

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SUBJECT: ARENA TABS ZABLAH AS VP TO VIE FOR CENTER VOTE

REF: A. SAN SALVADOR 1088 B. SAN SALVADOR 827 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: The Ambassador, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The (center-right, pro-U.S.) ARENA party named Arturo Zablah as its candidate for Vice President, to run alongside Rodrigo Avila in the March 15, 2009 election. Zablah is an independent businessman who served as Minister

of Economy (1989-1993) under President Cristiani. Press speculation says that Zablah would have power over economic policy, which he denies. Zablah's addition to the ticket is a clear sign that ARENA is trying to attract moderate voters, and close the gap with the (left-wing) FMLN's Mauricio Funes in recent polls. End Summary.

¶2. (C) After months of speculation, ARENA Presidential candidate Rodrigo Avila announced Arturo Zablah as his running mate October 9. ARENA formally nominated him on October 12. Avila denied as recently as September 16 that Zablah would be his running mate (ref A). The announcement comes on the heels of the Central American University's Public Opinion Institute's (IUDOP's) release of its latest poll, which shows Mauricio Funes, the FMLN candidate, ahead of Avila by nearly 15 points.

¶3. (C) Salvadoran daily La Prensa Grafica reported October 10 that Zablah agreed to be Avila's running mate under several conditions, including control of El Salvador's economic policy, a reorganization of the Court of Accounts (Note: roughly equivalent to our Government Accountability Office. End Note.), and the elimination of value-added tax for medicine. However, Zablah has publicly denied joining the ticket with any preconditions. In an interview published in La Prensa Grafica on October 11, he shot down the newspaper's prior claim, and said that at this juncture, he does not know over which parts of the government he would hold power.

¶4. (C) No members of ARENA's National Executive Council (COENA) were present at the October 9 press conference, an attempt to showcase Avila as ARENA's sole leader. There were also some notable absences when ARENA presented Zablah as its Vice Presidential candidate on October 12. Former Salvadoran President Armando Calderon Sol opted not to attend the event, demonstrating some of the continuing tensions within the party. Calderon Sol explained to the media that he was "completely in agreement with Arturo Zablah," and his absence was due to party statutes, which dictate that former presidents can only participate in COENA meetings every two months. However, current Salvadoran President Elias Antonio "Tony" Saca did attend.

¶5. (C) Zablah, a Georgia Tech graduate, is owner and director of Salvadoran furniture and mattress manufacturer Capri. He served in the Cristiani government as Minister of Economy and later as Presidential Commissioner for International Trade Negotiations. Zablah had explored the prospect of a run for the Salvadoran Presidency with the support of up to three small, centrist Salvadoran parties (ref B), but abandoned that pursuit as it was impossible to form a meaningful coalition among them.

¶6. (C) Oscar Santamaria, former Minister of Justice (1989-1991) and Minister of the Presidency of the Republic (1992-1994) under President Cristiani, as well as Minister of Foreign Affairs (1994-1995) in the Calderon Sol administration, and now foreign policy advisor to the Avila campaign, told PolCouns October 13 he believed the Zablah nomination would represent a turning point in Avila's campaign. He said it was a concrete demonstration that ARENA under Avila will work with those outside ARENA, regardless of party affiliation. He said he hoped including Zablah on the ticket would help the Avila campaign attract undecided, moderate voters who have until now been willing to consider the FMLN's Mauricio Funes.

¶7. (C) Comment: Zablah's selection is controversial within ARENA, as some of his personal views break with ARENA positions. For example, in the past, he has advocated undoing dollarization and returning to the Colon, and has argued for substantial increases to both pensions and the minimum wage. Plus, only a few months have passed since Zablah flirted with running for President with a coalition of other parties. However, he does appeal to the center, where ARENA badly needs help. The addition of Zablah can only help Avila's campaign. San Salvador's Universidad Tecnologica's (UTEC's) upcoming poll, due out by the end of October, should

give an indication of the Zablah's effect on the race.
GLAZER